

It is evident, to those familiar with the New Testament gospels, that Jesus loved parables and frequently used them to make his points about life in God's kingdom. One of his favorite metaphors was the vineyard, which in his parables always referred to or represented God's realm, or what we call his kingdom. Today's vineyard parable is the final one in what has been, over the last several Sundays, a series of vineyard parables. Today's parable teaches us a lot about God and God's will for us. To understand the teaching point, we must realize that God's realm, or God's kingdom is where God's will is supreme and where God's will truly reigns. In heaven, God's will is absolute; on earth, because we have free will, humans follow God's will imperfectly. But God's will, even though imperfectly executed by humanity, does break into our lives, more and more as we seek, in Christ, to open ourselves as to God's love and become instruments of his love and peace in this world. Thus, Jesus came into this world in large part to teach us how to discern God's will and live out that will in our own lives. When our failure to follow God's will is from our ignorance, Christ Jesus shows us the way. When our failure is because of willful stubbornness, Jesus, through the holy Spirit, prompts us to repent so that he can forgive and redeem us.

The parables teach us about God's will, so that we can be obedient servants. In the parables of the vineyards, the vineyards represent God's created world, a place that belongs to God. If our world belongs to God, we ought to obey God. In the imagery of the parable, God is the vineyard owner. When you enter the vineyard, you ought to acknowledge, in thought, word and deed, that the owner's rules prevail. But this is a global statement, and bible scholars inform us that in telling this parable, Jesus was not being quite this global. In fact, the Lord was focusing on the failure of the religious leaders of his day to obey and truly teach God's holy will.

In the today's parable, the owner sends messengers to try to get things right. Each time, the tenants, signifying the religious leaders, reject the owner's messengers. They even killed the final messenger, the vineyard owner's son. Hear this as God repeatedly sending his prophets to call Israel to repentance and holiness. Hear the tenants' response as a stubborn refusal to listen to the prophets and obey God's holy will. Finally, the owner sends his son, thinking that surely they would listen to and obey his son. There could be no more of a perfect stand-in for the owner than his own son. I shouldn't have to tell you to hear this son as Jesus. In this parable, Jesus prophesies his own death and the wrath of God that would follow. It is helpful if you realize that in the belief of the early Christian church, the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, including the Jewish Temple, was God's punishment for the Jewish rejection of Jesus. It is also helpful, in understanding this parable, to realize that the early Christian church clearly understood the Christians to be the new tenants that God chose for his kingdom, the "vineyard." There will be new tenants for this vineyard, Jesus said, and they will be those who obey the will of God.

Neat story; but is there any wonder that the Jewish religious leaders did not like Jesus very much? Let's shift this from Pharisaical rejection of Jesus to our world today and specifically to how Christians hear and respond to God's holy will, because in the teaching of the church today, Christians are still the new Israel, the new vineyard tenants. This means that we have a binding obligation to hear God's will and obey it to the letter. The problem is that we live in a complicated world and discerning God's will is up for grabs. It takes effort and how can you know with certainty that you always will get it right?

If things were easy, there would be no division in the universal church, yet in two thousand years we've

never had full agreement and tomorrow will be no different. As Christians, we are fragmented almost beyond belief. But let's be more focused. We can look at ourselves, our own families and extended families, our own parish, our own denomination and ask this question of ourselves: are we living in anything approaching perfect obedience to God's will? If we are, why is there so much division?

There are no easy answers. Those who think that the answers are obvious are simply looking for an easy out. Discernment is an ongoing effort and, I believe, in a dynamic world, God's will is an evolving revelation. We have to be willing to struggle for insight, the goal being on-going fidelity to God. Our openness and willingness creates a place where the Holy Spirit can do its work. A mind, individual or corporate, that insists on absolutes is a mind that closes out the evolving revelation of God which is what the work of the Holy Spirit is all about.

Again, this is true both individually and corporately. As individuals, we have to understand that if baptism was a one-time fix, life might be simpler but not freeing and growing. Truly becoming a Christian is a lifetime journey. We face the challenge of discerning God's will each and every day and we also face the decision of obedience. Struggling and rejecting simple and easy answers is part and partial of the Christian call. Discernment is the lifetime work of every true Christian and we have to remember that what we believe true today may not stand the light of tomorrow, not because God changes, but because our world changes and we also change. And, unlike God, we do not have perfect and universal knowledge. Living the struggle and constantly seeking God's truth is what Christianity is really all about. If we are not willing to do it, we are not good disciples. If a church or a denomination is not willing to do this, it is not truly seeking to be the body of Christ in this world.

God kicks no one out of the vineyard for trying to do his will, even when they make mistakes. It is only when we refuse to try, or are intentionally disobedient, that we are likely to receive an ejection notice. God asks only that we try with all our might and mind to know him and to serve him. He will guide us with the light of Christ, the Holy Spirit himself holding the torch to light the way. And as Jesus himself said, if we seek, we will find; if we knock, the door will be opened; and if we ask, it will be given.  
*Amen.*